

Lisa Atwood Wilkinson

Parmenides and *To Eon*

Reconsidering Muthos and Logos



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*For my parents, Bruce and Margot,
and
my children, Chris and Faith*

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Introduction

Mapping a Route to Parmenides

We attribute the philosophical poem, later called *On Nature*, to Parmenides, a single poet-philosopher, hailing from Elea.¹ But of the man Parmenides little more can be said than that he was possibly a pupil of Xenophanes, but “converted to the contemplative life” by association with the Pythagorean Ameinias, after whose death he possibly built a shrine. Parmenides might also have served the citizens of Elea and most likely “flourished” in the sixty-ninth Olympiad.² This brief account of “what is said” of Parmenides is compiled from second- and third-hand sources. In Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, this information comes from what Diogenes records on account of what Antiphon writes on account of what Pythodorus said, and from what Theophrastus, Sotion, and Speusippus “record,” although their information does not always concur.³ That even in antiquity basic facts about Parmenides do not concur suggests to me the crux of the problem we face in the twenty-first century when we read Parmenides’ poem. It is a problem concerning not the paucity or scarcity of text from the ancient world, but a difficulty created by our modern dependency upon, and reception of, text as if all texts at all times are meant to serve the same communicative purposes in the same ways. Prior to the formation of text, we are forced to say “there is not much we can say,” yet this supposition reveals the literate bias we bring—perhaps cannot help to bring—to the text itself.

In 2008, the fact remains that for most of us learning our native language includes learning how to read and write, for we are not credited with mastery of our language until we are literate. If we consider how those who are unable to read and to write are severely disadvantaged in their attempts to seek and gain employment, access public transportation, vote, locate telephone numbers, and even

cook, their inability to perform what we often consider to be tasks that demand the most minimal of practical knowledge demonstrates the cultural significance and value we place upon our own literacy. Simply put: reading and writing affords us a certain knowledge of the world. Yet because we live in such a highly developed state of literacy we not only tend to overlook our own illiterate citizens, it has become increasingly difficult for us to identify, evaluate, and appreciate knowledge that obtains in the absence of the written word.

Some recent studies maintain that the internet revolution and concomitant e-mail, instant messengers, text messaging, two-way pagers, and the like, “break the barriers” or even “blur distinctions” between speech and writing. But often these studies fail to consider that there are palpable aspects of speech that cannot be duplicated by writing.⁴ Moreover, the idea that something like e-mail can stand in for or replace spoken conversation suggests a general tendency to consider all forms of communication with the hindsight provided by the written word.⁵ In this way, those who can neither read nor write are called “illiterate,” and even a culture whose primary vehicle of communication is speech rather than writing is called, collectively, “preliterate.” The emphasis of each term contrasts and compares a developed state of literacy to either its under- or predevelopment.

Historically, the terms “pre-” or “protoliterate” refer to the gradual evolution and development of writing that emerges from the otherwise nonliterate practices of *Magna Graecia*. Beginning with *scripta forma* dating to at least the twelfth century,⁶ we have been able to trace the development of a specifically Greek alphabet through half a millennium. Many scholars discuss this historical period in terms of an evolution or a transition between an oral and a written tradition, that is, a transition from a culture of speaking and toward a culture of writing.⁷ Although the development of writing and its adaptation into patterns of the general culture is gradual,⁸ some scholars maintain that an increasing dependency upon writing for tasks such as poetic composition and political organization can be traced back to the seventh and sixth centuries, less than a hundred years before the time Parmenides “flourished.” While the primary vehicle of communication remains the spoken word, it seems that the written word is becoming more and more accessible as an alternative

means of communication. One might claim, then, that during Parmenides' era, writing comes to have a certain effect on poetry and, perhaps, on politics. Then again, there is substantial evidence—in, say, the dialogues of Plato⁹—to suggest that for the ancient Greeks writing is considered to be a “suspicious” or less reliable means of communication than speech.

Moreover, if we widen our frame of reference beyond ancient Greece, we begin to see that a pattern of suspicion about the written word obtains until—at least—the modern era. Eric Havelock suggests that we consider the figure of the feudal baron: although unlettered and often coarse or brutal he was nonetheless an “effective governor so far as he has at his side the monk or the clerk who commands the essential technology [i.e., the written word] by which his power is made effective in transmission”¹⁰ (126–27). Havelock's point is that not only does the feudal baron neither read nor write, he would not *deign* to do so. By analogy, a similar situation exists in Mycenaean Greece, during which writing appears in the form of administrative tabulations of marks and lines carved into stones and tablets. These “marks” are highly specified and codified, intelligible only to a narrow margin of clerical workers whose sole function was to record “inventories” and to report to the king who himself was not able to decipher the markings, and indeed would not wish to do so (117).

Neither the Mycenaean king nor the feudal baron would wish to decipher the writing because in a nonliterate or preliterate culture flourishing a document to gain command or control of a crowd is, as Aristophanes shows us, comical and a sign of a leader's incompetence.¹¹ In the prehistory of writing, then, the most respectable means available for persuading and guiding one's community is speech. Hence, any analysis of an ancient text must at least consider the cultural value of speech in antiquity as well as the values associated with preserving speech *to or as* text in a developing technology of writing.¹²

For us, the developing technology of writing means, of course, that any ancient text available to us *is available* due to the historical intersection of orality and literacy. This intersection is particularly acute with regard to Parmenides, however, because more than any other early philosopher Parmenides composes in Homeric speech.

Hence, the very means by which Parmenides practices philosophy is contrary to what we, as contemporary philosophers, recognize as philosophy. This ‘misfit’ between Parmenides’ work and our own occurs on a number of levels. First, as contemporary philosophers, we are formally trained to communicate our most significant ideas in writing or in reading aloud our written words. For us, at least, the practice of philosophy in large part depends upon our mastery of written texts. The proliferation of national and international conferences that require written proposals and papers for presentation, as well as the burgeoning business of academic presses that solicit and market “philosophy” textbooks, contributes to the fact that—in our time—reading and writing are as basic to teaching and communicating philosophy as they were perhaps remarkable—and troubling—to Plato and his predecessors.

Second, that we do identify Parmenides as a philosopher, or more appropriately a poet-philosopher, suggests that Parmenides in some way departs from the poetic tradition by making and warranting claims that resonate with our conception of philosophy. But the historical position of Parmenides’ text—poised as it is between orality and literacy—means that one of the issues impacting our reception of Parmenides and his work bears upon whether and how a “philosophical” appropriation of a certain way of communicating is entailed by or concomitant with emerging literacy. That is, is it the development of writing that makes Parmenides’ thought possible, and is it thereby the emergence of literacy that makes what we recognize as philosophy possible? The sense of “philosophical” most appropriate to early Greek thinkers is *sophia*—wisdom;¹³ early Greek thinkers are known as *hoi sophoi*. A specific question, then, is whether emerging literacy enhances, threatens, or perhaps even has no bearing upon, what the archaic Greeks conceive as “wisdom.” For there is also evidence to suggest that in archaic Greece writing reflects, enhances, but also *betrays* the communicative practices of the oral tradition. Historically speaking then, one cannot assume, as Derrida says the Western tradition assumes, that writing is prior to speech.¹⁴ To the contrary, recent scholarship in classical anthropology, philology, and philosophy, suggests that the dispositions and teleologies of speakers differ significantly from the dispositions and teleologies

of writers.¹⁵ Even if we assume that all communication is meant to effect some purpose, it nevertheless does not follow that all modes of communication effect the same purposes in the same ways. And this could mean, among other things, that there are differences and limits to what one can achieve through speech and through writing. Might these differences bear upon how we understand Parmenides' "philosophy"?

If so, then the task of interpreting Parmenides' text demands analysis and appreciation of an archaic Greek disposition to and experience of speech, specifically Homeric speech—that type of speech that comprises the vocabulary and rhythm of Parmenides' poem. One of the most compelling, recent analyses of Homeric speech occurs in Marcel Detienne's *Masters of Truth*.¹⁶ Here, Detienne suggests that prior to questions about the relationship of speech to reality (philosophy), and prior to certain "theories of language" which treat language as a tool for persuasion and political assembly (rhetoric), nonliterate Greeks display a certain disposition to, and experience of, language that ill fit modern and contemporary accounts of language. Contrary, then, to our basic assumptions about speech, an archaic Greek disposition reflects a general cultural expectation about the unique role a certain type of speech plays in archaic culture. Detienne argues that from at least the ninth century on, there develops a "single model of speech with shared gestures, practices, and institutions" (13). Detienne names this single model of speech "sung speech" or "efficacious" speech. Sung speech does not simply describe reality; rather sung speech affects reality or, in a quite literal sense, makes what is real happen. Detienne's analysis is intriguing because it not only gives us a glimpse into a communicative practice quite foreign to our own, the phenomenon of "sung speech" suggests a general disposition toward language which transcends its boundaries as a medium. That is, if "sung speech" is the type of speech that makes things happen, then "sung speech" exhibits and solicits a power or force that moves beyond or through the particular and concrete details and images that *we normally associate* with the limitations of speech. This implies that the archaic Greeks may have sustained an entirely different set of attitudes and expectations for speech than our own. If, as I will try to show, the archaic Greeks did not always, if

ever, adhere to what we call a representationalist account of language, and would be more likely to recognize a nonrepresentationalist function of language,¹⁷ then our ways of explaining and rationalizing ancient Greek texts by means of a representationalist account of language will be incomplete, if not inaccurate or misleading. Seen in this light, the issue is not so much about the limitations of an exegesis informed by our literate biases; rather, what is at stake is the imposition of a conceptual scheme upon texts that did not emerge from this scheme, and, accordingly, may be distorted by such an imposition.

I identify the possibility of our distortions of ancient texts as an historical *and* philosophical problem. While lack of attention to historical context might cause us to impose certain philosophical—and metaphilosophical—theories upon ancient texts, lack of philosophical insight might cause us to distort the meaning and significance of these texts, forcing them to say too much or too little.¹⁸ For example, while Martin Heidegger helps reorient our understanding of the historicity of texts, he does tend to undervalue the particular and contextual details of communicative practices devoted to preserving and transmitting culturally significant information prior to the formation of texts. That is, although Heidegger pays homage to the dynamics of oral communication in ancient culture, I suggest that he does not sufficiently consider how the practices of oral communication influence the thought and the reception of the early Greek thinkers he writes about. Heidegger's analyses of early Greek thinking are primarily performed through Heidegger's own literate lens.

Too, while perhaps no one more than Eric Havelock helps reorient our understanding of the significance of the oral tradition to ancient Greek philosophy, Havelock does tend to offer a monolithic—or monolinguistic—image of the purpose and intent of ancient philosophy. The possibility that thinkers like Xenophanes and Parmenides are more closely and conceptually associated to oral poetry than to Plato and Aristotle, and that this association might be the basis of Xenophanes' and Parmenides' philosophical significance, is not—I submit—sufficiently considered in Havelock's writings.¹⁹

But if we gather together the insights of Heidegger and Havelock, as well as the insights of others influenced or inspired by their work,